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ABSTRACT

Using the framework of cultural context analysis, this paper examines how cultural myopia can lead to inaccurate generalizations regarding play and development among children in diverse sociocultural groups in the United States. The paper argues that analyses drawing causal connections between playing with particular toys or in certain ways and the development of specific behaviors and attitudes are too simplistic. Play with action figures by working-class children of color is misinterpreted because analysis focuses on the manifest symbols and aggression and underplays children's understanding of the objects as symbols and how they are used. Careful analysis of play should not impose one's own meanings on to props, such as assuming that Barbie dolls are objects signifying sex identification. Mental representations drawn upon in play include rules, behavioral codes, and social constraints from the social and cultural context of the child. Although Vygotskian and Piagetian theories proposed invention and internalization as keys in children's cognitive development, neither addressed the specific social and cultural context of cognitive development. Discursive psychology is a perspective focusing on the communicative context which considers children's uses of signs to understanding the development of their thinking. Practitioners and researchers need to consider more carefully the signs and symbols used in play, reflect on biases as observers, and begin to view play as the use that children make of symbols. The concern should not be the props or toys themselves, but rather, how children are socialized into particular uses of the props in play. (KDFB)

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"They Can't Even Play Right!" Cultural Myopia in the Analysis of Play—Cultural Perspectives on Human Development

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Every time the same story. Your Barbie is roommates with my Barbie, and my Barbie's boyfriend comes over and your Barbie steals him, okay? Kiss kiss kiss. Then the two Barbies fight. You dumbbell! He's mine. Oh no he's not, you stinky! Only Ken's invisible, right? Because we don't have money for a stupid-looking boy doll when we'd both rather ask for a new Barbie outfit next Christmas. We have to make do with your mean-eyed Barbie and my bubblehead Barbie and our one outfit apiece not including the sock dress.

Until next Sunday when we are walking through the flea market on Maxwell Street and there! Lying on the street next to some tool bits, and platform shoes with the heels all squashed, and a

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fluorescent green wicker wastebasket, and aluminum foil, and hubcaps, and a pink shag rug, and windshield wiper blades, and dusty mason jars, and a coffee can full of rusty nails. There! Where? Two Mattel boxes. One with the "Career Gal" ensemble, snappy black-and-white business suit, three-quarter-length sleeve jacket with kick-pleat skirt, red sleeveless shell, gloves, pumps, and matching hat included. The other, "Sweet Dream" dreamy pink-and-white plaid nightgown and matching robe, lace-trimmed slippers, hairbrush and hand mirror included. How much? Please, please, please, please, please, please, please, until they say okay.

—from Sandra Cisneros, *Barbie-Q*

Barbie, object of desire in Cisneros's vignette about a little girl growing up in a Mexican-American community in the 1960s, is still very much a "toy of choice" for many little girls living in the 1990s, as a stroll down the aisles of almost any major toy store in the U.S. will quickly confirm. For very different reasons, Barbie is also high on the list of a number of educators and other child advocates concerned about the potentially harmful effects of some children's toys. Every year, a few weeks before Christmas, at the peak of the present-buying frenzy for children, these concerns become the subject of a good deal of attention in the public media. For a couple of years now, we have been struggling to put our finger on what it is we find so irksome about public conversations about the appropriateness of various toys.

Now, don't get us wrong—not all of these public conversations are irksome. Who could deny the value of consumer warnings about toys with dangerous parts that could be swallowed or that might go up in flames? On the other hand, analyses suggesting that playing with certain toys can have harmful, and clearly predictable, psychological consequences for children—that action figures like the Power Rangers, can precipitate violent behavior among boys, or that Barbie's impossibly proportioned physique can promote anorexic behaviors among girls—just don't sit well with us. Nor do the more benign critiques claiming that toys like Barbie and the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers stifle the development of children's imagination and creativity by encouraging play that is repetitive, passive, and ultimately only imitative of television.

Why exactly do such analyses bother us so much? In part, because they are too simplistic. There are two issues we think are salient. First, in a nation grasping for answers to problems that seem increasingly complex and difficult to solve, some analysts too easily draw causal connections between playing with particular toys or playing in particular ways and the development of specific behaviors and attitudes. The tendency to draw these connections, despite the absence of definitive research, is vividly illustrated by the frequency with which violent toys and television are linked to the most disturbing instances of violence among children appearing in the public media, such as the disturbing recent story of a ten year old beating an infant to death.

The second issue we want to raise here has to do with how play in culturally diverse communities is construed by observers who are not members of those communities. Take, for example, the critique which claims that playing with Barbie dolls tends to encourage female passivity and self-identification as a "sex object." Leaving aside for a moment the issue raised above—that there is no research establishing any kind of causal relationship among these variables—in the absence of data about what children from various cultural and socioeconomic communities actually *do* with Barbie dolls and the cultural meanings that are attached to those behaviors, there is little justification for making a priori judgments about whether or not Barbie is a "good" toy for children to play with.

Cisneros' *Barbie-Q* is an excellent case in point. In this vignette, the ritualistic nature of the play between the narrator and her girlfriend ("Every time the same story. Your Barbie is roommates with my Barbie . . .") and the Barbies' highly stylized fights over the invisible Ken ("You dumbbell! He's mine." "Oh no he's not, you stinky!") serve not to foster female passivity and deference to males but instead to reinforce and celebrate the primacy of female friendship. Rather than stifling the imagination, Barbie becomes, for Cisneros, the literal "stuff of imagination" as she transforms her own memories of playing Barbie into a story about friendship in a particular cultural context.

The fact is that there are many communities in which children do not share the same sensibilities, meanings, and values as the researchers who write in universalistic terms about "children's

play." We believe that it is highly problematic when inquiry into children's play and human development fails to account for the cultural contexts in which they occur. In this chapter, we are advocating a more systematic and careful examination of the social and cultural contexts of children's play.

Our aim is to address the oversight of *cultural myopia in the study of play*. We will do this by first revisiting relevant theory to articulate the role of culture and play in the study of children's development. Then we will illustrate what we mean by cultural myopia in play in light of the theory. Finally, we will examine paradigms shift and the emergence of new perspectives on human development, developmental psychology, cognition, and learning that provide the means for "unmyopic" study.[1]

Culture and the Role of Children's Play

The role of play in children's development is widely recognized among researchers and practitioners in early childhood education. Vygotsky (1978) has given this role particularly strong prominence. Referring to play as "the highest level of preschool development," he writes:

> In play, a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development (p. 102).

It is in play that the child first loses her sole dependence on the physical world as a motivator for action and begins to act on the basis of ideas. For the very young child, Vygotsky tells us, it is things that dictate what she must do: "a door demands to be opened and closed, a staircase to be climbed a bell to be rung" (p. 96). For the child old enough to play, however, a staircase no longer "demands" to be climbed, but instead is subject to the child's fancy and serves the purposes of play. It becomes a train, a

[1]Although we draw most on theoretical developments in the disciplines of educational psychology, developmental psychology, and cognitive psychology, there are, of course, parallel developments in cultural anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, and other disciplines that intersect in interesting ways.

bus, an apartment house for paper dolls. In the tradition of Piaget and most contemporary developmental theory, this liberation of children's thought and perception from dependence on the physical world is heralded as an important developmental achievement because it not only lays the foundation for later symbolic reasoning but also allows the "working out" in imagination of many childhood dilemmas.

Contemporary theory holds that when children acquire the means to see objects as "standing for" something else, their capacity for symbolic representation and imaginative play is subsequently amplified, making possible more imaginative play and more sophisticated use of concepts, rules, and roles. This capacity is called *signification* when it is used to communicate to *others* the use of an object as a sign or symbol for something else.

Those who analyze children's play must account for children's significations. To the extent that children's play reveals stabilized uses of signs and symbols, concepts will be in operation during play. Therefore, a careful study of play must not only take careful account of how children construe their own signs and symbols used in play but also everything about the situation that is indicative of what the signs and symbols in use might mean in that context. Consider an example given by Harre and Gilbert involving a slip of paper. If a child who has had no experience with tickets is given a slip of paper, the meaning of the concept "ticket" will be beyond her grasp, even if during play the slip of paper is given to the child by another in the way a ticket is meant to be used. If in play or in real-life ticket use the child acquires the range of experience that begin to organize the concept of ticket, then the paper may begin to signify "ticket." The trick for careful analysis of play is not to impose one's own significations on the props—such as assuming that Barbie dolls are objects signifing sex identification as opposed to the actual signification of the children in Cisneros's example, where Barbie was merely a prop for enactments of their future selves as women and lifelong friends.

We think it is important to point out, however, that there is much more going on in play than the expansion of children's capacity to represent and manipulate concepts, rules, and roles. A child made uneasy and frightened when her mother leaves her with a baby-sitter is reassuringly in charge when she reminds her doll

babies that she'll be coming home soon before clomping out the bedroom door in her mother's high heels. A child frustrated by his older brother's always taking the larger share of treats is able to work out, and indeed to *control* the working out, of a more equitable distribution of plastic treats among his stuffed animal companions on an imaginary trip to McDonald's.

The mental representations of the world that children draw upon in play are not merely internal representations of objects and relations. Children also internalize the rules, behavioral codes, and social constraints from the social and cultural contexts they grow up in. The extent to which these "mental representations" direct children's activities in play is well illustrated by Vygotsky's example (taken from Sully) of two sisters, aged five and seven, "playing sisters." Within this game, the child acts out her conception of what a sister should be. Vygotsky writes:

> In life the child behaves without thinking that she is her sister's sister. In the game of sisters playing at 'sisters,' however, they are both concerned with displaying their sisterhood; the fact that two sisters decided to play sisters induces them both to acquire rules of behavior. Only actions that fit these rules are acceptable to the play situation . . . (p. 95)

What are the "rules of behavior" Vygotsky refers to in this example, and from where do these rules originate? We would argue—and this is in fact our main point—that these rules are a cultural construction, a set of behavioral rules or norms of interaction that define "being a sister" within the context of a particular cultural community. In the process of "playing sisters," the girls in Vygotsky's example draw upon this cultural construction to guide both their own and one another's behavior. Through this process, they both co-enact and jointly recreate their culture's definition of "sister-ness."

For an accurate interpretation of this sister play, we must immediately ask, *where does each of the children get her mental representation of "sisterness"?* To what extent can it be considered a representation both shared between them and also worked out, i.e., learned, through the process of play? We would argue that their mental representation, their conception, of what it means to be a

sister is a cultural construct that the sisters draw upon both to act out their roles of "sister" during play and to monitor and give feedback on one another's behavior. In the process, the mental representation becomes a joint construction. The children's play behavior is thus deeply steeped in culture.

An Example of Play in an African-American Community

In her study of a group of African-American girls playing house, Goodwin (1990) provides a rich illustration of the interplay between the "rules of mother-ness" as a cultural construction, on the on hand, and the children's re-invention of the cultural construction through play, on the other hand. The rules she illustrates in her episode of girls playing house concerns how they organize the status relationships of the participants (e.g., "build a hierarchy") through the use of unmasked imperatives and directives. In the episode, the most highly valued role is that of the mother.

According to Goodwin, girls enacting the role of mother when playing house address directives to their "children" that are similar in structure to those that their own mothers use. The girls deliver loud and emphatic directives in play-mother talk, which, as Goodwin points out, has been demonstrated in earlier research to be the principal means by which children realize the position of dominance and submission between characters, such as that of the mother/child relationship. In the episode, Patrice, with three "children" (Kerry, Bea, and Brenda) in her household, and Martha, with two "children" (Prestina and Drucilla), issue directives in the following interchanges:[2]

(66) Patrice: Hurry up and go to bed!

(67) Martha: BRING THOSE CARDS BACK,
BRING THAT BOOK IN THE HOUSE
AND COME HOME!

[2]In sociolinguistic conversational data transcription, line numbering is used to give readers a contextual location for portions of the interchange. The equal signs, bold type, italics, and slashes are used to notate different emphases and rhythms. These are left in here for accuracy of quotation so that readers can derive the lively sense of tone.

Don't *climb* over that way.
You climb over the *right* way.

(68) Martha: Drucilla, BRENDA, Prestina,
GET IN THE CAR!
Get in the car.
Prestina and Brenda, and all y'all get in the car. =
Where Drucilla at. GET IN THE CAR.
YOU GOIN' OVER *MY* HOUSE.
GO ON OVER AND GET—
UH—WHERE'S DRUCILLA AT.

(69) Martha: COME ON *DRU*CILLA,
Drucilla: We playin' cards,
Martha: I DON'T CARE *WHAT* YOU PLAYIN'.=
IT'S TIME TO GO *IN*.
= YOU GOTTA GO TO *SCHOOL*
TOMORROW!

This interchange illustrates the assumption of the mother role in accordance with the construct of motherness: the "mothers" provide culturally sanctioned reasons why activities of the "children" should be done in specific ways.

Goodwin in this Maple Street episode shows how an asymmetry in the enacted behavior of the mother and children during play mirrors that of the care/taker child relationships in that community. Despite the fact that the issuance of directives by the "mother" is the clearest sign of dominance in the role play, the Maple Street girls do not uniformly display deference in accordance with their "child" role. In particular, Goodwin found that although the "children" displayed deference in requests for information (e.g., "Can I hold your book?" and "How old am *I*?"), they did not always display deference in their responses to the "mothers'" imperatives. Instead, Goodwin reports that they follow a pattern used in responding to their own mothers—a pattern of excuses and counter accusations:

1 Martha: COME ON *DRU*CILLA.
2 Dru: We playin' cards.

3 Martha: I DON'T CARE *WHAT* YOU PLAYING'.=
COME ON.=
IT'S TIME TO GO *IN.*
5 = YOU GOTTA GO TO *SCHOOL*
TOMORROW!
6 DRU: Prestina TOOK THE CARDS,
7 Martha: Prestina!
8 Dru: Prestina took//some a' the cards.

So the variations on the role are culturally and socially defined, as is the role itself.

To summarize to this point, we take issue with researchers and children's advocates who write in universalistic terms about children's play without taking into account the cultural contexts in which play occurs. We have argued that the absence of systematic evidence about what children from various cultural and socioeconomic communities actually *do* with Barbie dolls and action figures makes the crusade to eliminate certain types of toys a misplaced priority in our common effort to address violence in our society. We argue instead that our chief priority is to achieve a more systematic and careful understanding of how violence is socialized by examining the social and cultural contexts of children's play.

Children grow into cognitive life and are *socialized into cultural life.* Play is the means by which we can understand children's constructs of the world. So although representations of violent person-to-person conflict abound in the media, even in animated television fare (e.g., GI Joe, X-Men), these are not necessarily children's constructions. Children reinvent and reconstruct as they internalize new understanding. So the developmental question is not simply one of how we diminish the effect of exposure by limiting *children's access to props* (e.g., action figures), but rather of how we deal with the real *cultural expressions of violence and aggression among adults* in the social contexts in which children grow up.

Play as "Acts of Meaning" in Cultural Context

We now move to an examination of the recent turn to a new perspective on human development, developmental psychology, cognition, and learning that provides theoretical foundation for a

"culturally *un*myopic" study of play. Following Harre and Gillet, we will use the term "discursive psychology"[3] to refer to the new perspective, which seeks to restore the communicative context back into studies of mind and cognitive development. In this account, play consists of acts of meaning, in the sense meant by Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 1990). To study play is not merely to study children's symbolism in order to get at what they are thinking and how their thinking develops. It is also an understanding of children's use of signs and their construction of meaning in the communicative and cultural contexts in which play occurs.

The philosopher Wittgenstein once said that "meaning is the use to which we put our signs." Following on this idea, discursive psychology takes account of children's significations (uses of signs) as psychological phenomena we should pay attention to in order to understand the development of their thinking and meaning making (Harre and Gilbert, 1994).[4] On this account, the study of play is the study of the development of mind in such a way as to avoid interpreting children's experiences separately from the communicative and cultural contexts that give them meaning:

> The study of the mind is a way of understanding the phenomena that arise when different social cultural discourses are integrated within an identifiable human individual situated in relation to those discourses (Harre and Gilbert, 1994, p. 22).

Children, we repeat, grow into cognitive life and are *socialized into cultural life.* Play is the first means by which children make use of symbols/signs in their preverbal world. Through play we are

[3]Other terms of reference for this new perspective include "folk psychology" (Greenwood, 1991; Bruner, 1990), and "cultural psychology" (Stigler, Shweder, and Herdt, 1990). The reader should refer to Bruner (1990) and Harre and Gilbert (1994) for a thorough discussion of the emergence of this new perspective and paradigm shift.
[4]As Harre and Gilbert point out, the so-called "second cognitive revolution" was a turning away from the technologic project of ascertaining how the human mind interpreted, "processed," and "internally represented" information in meaningful ways. The revolution was, instead, a turning toward the original aims of the "first" cognitive revolution—namely, the project of discovering and describing the meanings that human beings create out of their encounters with the world. Because this project involves the determination and description of the symbolic activities that human beings employ in constructing and making sense of the world, the centrality of studying culture, narrative, and language was assured.

able to see children's intentional construction of meaning as they internalize relationships between signs and the social-cultural contexts in which they are used. For Vygotsky, *internalization* is the process by which the social becomes the psychological. This means that internalization of function and structure is not the transferral of an external action or activity to an internal representation, as suggested by Piagetian theory, but instead the process by which the internal "plane of consciousness" is formed.

Recall Vygotsky's example of playing sisters. He is telling us that in deciding to "play sisters," the two girls become aware of the rules of behavior of sisterhood normally enacted out of awareness but that become explicit to the girls as constraints to the "game." But there is more going on in this play than the sisters gaining a meta-awareness of the cultural codes or behavioral rules for "being a sister." First, the behavioral rules that direct play are, in the course of play, reworked or "reinvented," to use Vygotsky's term. Children in play are not bound by the rules in their role enactments, as their play may constitute variations on the theme. For example, if one sister chooses the role of "mean sister," the behavioral codes for "sisterhood" are the basis for the fanciful creation of the mean sister in play. In play the cultural codes and behavioral rules for sisterhood not only direct the play but also are *re-invented* in the course of play.

The child's "plane of consciousness" is formed in the structures that are transmitted to the child by others in speech, social interactions, and interactions of cooperative activity. Thus, individual consciousness arises not merely from the recapitulations of one's own actions and speech but also from the actions and speech of others. These notions fit "relational practice" as well as the "ecology of mind" and the intelligence of individuals built into social systems. Although Vygotsky never explicitly incorporated the concept of culture as we currently understand it, it's clear that the social plane of his theory incorporates the cultural features of the community in which the developing child is socialized.

Both Vygotsky and Piaget proposed *invention* and *internalization* as key processes in the cognitive development of children. For both (and especially for Piaget), the insight is that to *understand is to reconstruct*. Piaget and Vygotsky agree that the child has an active role in the reorganization and reconstruction of these experi-

ences and that as the external plane is internalized, transformations in structure and function occur. Vygotsky's theory offers the insight that it is important to look not just at the individual but also at the external world—including its social, historical, and cultural aspects.

> From the very first days of the child's development his activities acquire a meaning of their own in a system of social behavior and, being directed towards a definite purpose, are refracted through the prism of the child's environment. The path from object to child and from child to object passes through another person. This complex of human structure is a product of a development process deeply rooted in the links between individual and social history (Vygotsky, p. 30).

Unfortunately, Piaget and Vygotsky never got around to addressing the social and cultural context of cognitive development. What is important here, however, is the clear and deep sense of what is meant by *constructivism*. The construction detailed in theory above is clearly *not* accessible to an observer looking at a single episode of children's play. This construction is developmental—it takes place over a period of time in social and cultural context—and is not determinable in the informal observations of a parent, teacher, or caregiver.

According to the theory of Piaget and Vygotsky, what children construct through play cannot be ascertained by either casual or systematic observation without an understanding of the social-cultural contexts in which the play occurs. Without this understanding, any observational judgments a parent, teacher, or caregiver makes about whether the play involves "dynamic knowledge construction" or is "merely repetitive and imitative" will reveal more about the observer's own cultural biases than it will about children's construction of meaning. So the danger in the recent embrace of constructivism is in its potential for practitioners and theorists alike to dress old biases in new clothes.

As Phillips (1995) demonstrates, there is a vast diversity of constructivist views, which, once you get past the common thesis that "knowledge is constructed," bear little resemblance to one another. The extent to which "constructivism has become some-

thing akin to a secular religion" (Phillips, 1995, p. 5) hampers attempts to develop unmyopic play theory and interpretations of play. Therefore, the concept of looking at play through a "constructivist lens" deserves a great deal of careful consideration, for the view is more a kaleidoscopic composite of patterns than a single image viewed through a single lens (constructivist or otherwise).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we advocated a more systematic and careful examination of the social and cultural contexts of children's play. We argued for a critical look at contemporary approaches to children's play in light of cultural myopia, that failure to take into account the cultural contexts in which play occurs. The significance of culture as a defining feature in the emergence of cognitive development is acknowledged in the theory of both Piaget and Vygotsky, although neither got around to addressing culture specifically. Gregory Bateson articulated the role of culture nearly forty years ago in this way:

> The culture into which an individual is born stresses the certain of his potentialities and suppresses others, and it acts selectively, favoring the individuals who are best endowed with the potentialities preferred in the culture and discriminating against those with alien tendencies. In this way the culture standardizes the organization of the emotions of individuals (Bateson, 1958, p. 115).

Taking account of culture requires a deeper look at the signs and symbols—the use children make of the props—in play. It also requires a deep look at oneself as an observer so that one's own culturally bound assumptions and biases do not prejudice the critical work of determining children's use of their props in play—both material (e.g., Barbie dolls, action figures) and conceptual-symbolic (e.g., "sister," "girlfriend"). We have to get beyond the unreflective, atheoretic, superficial, and ungrounded designation of activities children are engaged in, involving either props or other children, as play. This means no longer merely defining play in terms of activities of children that people would conventionally character-

ize as play, such as referring to an individual child manipulating toys on the floor as *individual play*, or a group of children doing so as *group play*, or children doing so outdoors as *outdoor play*, and so on.

Play is an important developmental process in childhood. Children are *working out meanings that pertain to needs*—and many of these are culturally constrained. Vygotsky writes:

> The maturing of needs is a dominant issue in this discussion because it is impossible to ignore the fact that the child satisfies certain needs in play. If we do not understand the special character of these needs, we cannot understand the uniqueness of play as a form of activity (p. 92–93).

Following Wittgenstein's dictum that "meaning is the use we make of our signs," play is the use that children make of symbols (Bruner's props). Vygotsky: "Play in a child creates an imaginary situation." Play is to be understood as symbolic, but, as Vygotsky warns, not in the sense of adult symbol use or manipulation of symbols for purposes other those intentions and incentives of the child engaged in play. Hence, in conjunction with symbolic "imagineering," play is realization in symbolic forms of tendencies that cannot be immediately gratified (Vygotsky, p. 94).

Assumptions made about other people's children in the absence of cultural understanding—the classic problem that Lisa Delpit talks about—is the issue here in making judgments about play behavior. With no cultural analysis, play theorists and practitioners are unlikely to understand "the use children make of their signs." We have seen numerous instances in which toys such as the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers were the tools by which children carried out expressive play, dramas that had little to do with those depicted on television. So our real concern is not the props themselves but how children are socialized into particular uses of the props in play. Toward this end, what always seems to get left out is an analysis of what meaning the children themselves ascribe to these props. Imitation is not the sole means by which play should be interpreted; it's the use to which children put signs and props that is more significant.

The best examples of the worst cultural myopia are the cru-

sades against the props of play (e.g., Barbie dolls, action figures) masquerading as an intervention on behalf of children—to save them from self-identification with violent expression and as sex objects. With no cultural analyses, this seems to us the classic case of white America working out its own anxieties regarding the issues that seem to threaten the social fabric. It seems to us disingenuous to condemn and restrict the use of props from one cultural perspective without fully exploring and understanding the rich world in which children may use the props as expressions of fashion, folklore, and "futuring" in self-expression. In what ways are the stimulating use of imagination, imaginative use of form, variations on a theme, verbal play, and improvisation with these props going on in cultural communities that are not middle-class white America? It is the future contribution of play theory to find out.